

Finding #7: The opportunity for students with disabilities to receive appropriate educational services in their community public school varies widely across Virginia. Where a student lives—not only the type or degree of disability—is a major predictor of how restrictive the student’s educational placement will be.

The following statistics raise questions about whether some students with disabilities may be unnecessarily placed in segregated settings.

Placement practices vary widely among school divisions in Virginia with regard to separate day school and regional program placement. Some school divisions educate all their students in public school while others use private schools and regional programs for a high percentage of students with disabilities.

- 9 school divisions educate all of their students in community public schools
- 21 school divisions use private schools for below 1% of their students with disabilities and place no students in regional programs.
- 33 school divisions had high (above 3% and up to 14.9%) of their students with disabilities in private day schools.
- 12 school divisions with high rates of private school placements also place students in regional programs which would mean that their placement rates are even higher. *(Data for number of students from each school division in a regional program was not available so the total number of students in a segregated placement is not available for the school divisions using regional programs).*
- In many school divisions, once a student is placed in a segregated setting, he or she remains there long term. (Average length of stay is over 200 days per year).

The following statistics indicate a correlational relationship between proximity to a private day school and the probability of placement in a private day school. The correlation is stronger for small school divisions.

- 42 school divisions had 1% or fewer of their students with disabilities in private day schools. 9 of these 42 divisions **(21%)** have private day schools in their county or city.
- 33 school divisions had 3% or more identified students in private day schools. 22 of these 33 divisions **(66%)** have private day schools in their county or city.
- 16 small school divisions (under 400 identified students) had 1% or fewer identified students in private day schools. 1 of these 16 divisions **(6%)** have a private day school.
- 12 school divisions (all small) had very high (5% or more) identified students in private day schools. 9 of these 12 divisions **(75%)** have private day schools in their county or city.

Recommendations for Discussion

1. Request that VDOE undertake a comprehensive evaluation of placement practices in school divisions with very high placement rates in private schools and regional programs to determine whether some students are unnecessarily placed in segregated placements and report findings to the COY. The evaluation should:
 - Determine which disability labels put students most at risk for long term placement in private and regional programs?

- Examine CSA and regional placement funding streams incentivize segregated placements in some school divisions and suggest statutory and policy changes that would allow for those funding streams to be used to develop capacity in public schools.
- Clarify why public school capacity (availability of appropriate services and limitations of LEA staff in serving complex students) is so different among VA school divisions.
- Identify the factors besides capacity, parent preference, and proximity that may influence school divisions to make long term segregated placements?
- Clarify how CSA and regional placement funding streams incentivize segregated placements in some school divisions and suggest statutory and policy changes that would allow for those funding streams to be used to develop capacity in public schools.
- Thoroughly review the research comparing outcomes for students with disabilities in inclusive settings versus outcomes for students in segregated settings.
- Find evidence-based strategies for helping high-placement school systems develop capacity for educating students with complex needs in public school inclusive settings. SWIFT Schools developed by the University of Kansas is one such evidence based system for developing inclusive practices at the school division and state level.

Finding #7b: It is unclear if public funds are being used most efficiently to provide services in the least restrictive environment.

The cost and number of students placed in segregated placements is increasing every year (See Finding # 3) while current funding for public schools in VA is not enough to meet the need and increasing numbers of hard-to-serve students in public schools (See finding #2). Average costs for educating a student with disabilities in a public school is just over \$13,000, in a regional program is just over \$29,000, and in a private school is over \$40,000 (See findings # 3 and #4).

The two funding sources that pay for private school and regional program placements—Children’s Services Act funds and VDOE funding for regional programs—have no funding caps. The amount required each year is determined by the number of IEPs written for private school and regional program placements by individual school divisions.

Any evaluation of efficiency requires that we be able to measure and compare outcomes. Currently, because Private schools and do not report outcome data as public schools must do, we are unable to evaluate whether these much more expensive programs result in better outcomes for the students who attend private schools. Evaluating outcomes in regional programs is difficult due to current reporting procedures.

Recommendations under finding # 5 suggests requiring private schools be included on school report card system and be required to report the same information as public schools report. Finding # 4 recommends introducing legislation requiring regional programs report the same data as public schools. Both of these recommendations are excellent steps to improve accountability in regional programs and private schools. However, the recommendations stop short of comparing outcome data for students in private placements and regional programs with similar students in public school placement to determine whether the excess cost of private schools and regional programs results in better outcomes for students. Such a comparison would speak to the issue of efficiency of spending.

Recommendations for Discussion

1. Develop a protocol similar to the proposed VDOE Study of Regional Programs to review current practice in private special education schools licensed by the VDOE and report findings to the Commission on Youth.
2. VDOE conduct a yearly analysis comparing school report card outcome data for students in private schools and regional programs with outcomes for students in public school programs and report comparative data as part of VDOE annual reporting to the public. Based on this comparative data, report to the COY on the whether funds for private school placements and regional programs are an efficient use of public funds.
3. Conduct a review of research on outcomes for students with disabilities in inclusive settings compared to students in segregated settings.
4. The Commission on Youth request that the time frame for completing this study be extended so that this outcome data can be examined in light of the request in Resolution 193 that funding streams be evaluated for efficiency.